

United States : Weekly comments on the COVID-19 Pandemic — U.S. capitalism, national and international inequalities

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The official U.S. death toll in the United States as of April 14 is over 25,000. It was 12,000 seven days before. The real toll is much higher, as I reported last week, as many deaths from the virus among the homeless, those too poor to have health insurance, undocumented immigrants, those who die at home and others who don't go to hospitals aren't counted or even tested.

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An article in the April 13 *New York Times* concerning deaths in New York City gives additional information to what I presented before. The article states, "Over the 31 days ending April 4, more than twice the typical number of New Yorkers died. That total for the city includes deaths directly linked to the virus as well as those from other causes, like heart attacks and cancer.

"The numbers contradict the notion that many people who are dying would have died shortly anyway. And they suggest that the current coronavirus death figures understate the real toll of the virus, either because of undercounting of coronavirus deaths, increases in deaths that are normally preventable, or both."

The increases of deaths in the latter category can be explained by the fact that hospitals and medical personnel have to concentrate on the sickest coronavirus victims overwhelming the hospitals and equipment such as ventilators which are in short supply, to the detriment of people with other conditions, as well as fear on the part of those with those other conditions of going to the hospital that they will contract the virus there.

These increases in deaths that are normally preventable are indirect results of the virus and should be counted in the COVID-19 death toll.

The Virus Exposes Reality of U.S. Capitalism

The media has begun to notice this. First of all, while the media has talked about economic inequality, what this means has been starkly evident by the pandemic.

The fundamental contradiction of capitalism is that between the capitalist class and the working class. It is the working class that has suffered from the economic shutdown. Unemployment has hit the workers hard. In the three weeks ending April 4, 17,000,000 workers filed for unemployment insurance for the first time. The whole unemployment system has been so overwhelmed that millions more were not even able to file, a *Times* editorial estimated.

The poorest workers, who live from paycheck to paycheck, are in danger of not being able to make ends meet.

The capitalists continue to live their lavish lifestyles. They “self isolate” in their mansions, and continue to eat their upscale meals either cooked by their servants or ordered in from their upscale restaurants.

The trillions of dollars the federal government (with bipartisan support) has allocated to ameliorate the economic effects of the pandemic are greatly skewed to bail out the big capitalist corporations and banks, while directing miserly funds to workers, inadequate to meet their needs.

It is the medical workers who are on the frontline dealing with the pandemic. Nary a single capitalist is seen in the emergency rooms. A scant few of these applaud those risking their lives, but from afar.

Small business owners, part of the middle class, have also been hit hard, and their businesses may not survive. However, even they live better than their laid-off workers.

A second major contradiction in U.S. capitalism is the national oppression of African Americans. That began when the first slaves were brought to the British colonies in America in the seventeenth century and has lasted to the present.

There was a brief period after the Civil War that ended chattel slavery, ten years or so called “Reconstruction”, when this oppression was ameliorated somewhat only to take on the new form of de jure segregation (“apartheid” in Afrikaans) in the former Confederacy and de facto segregation in the rest of the country in a counter-revolution to the Second American Revolution (Civil War).

This new form of the national oppression of Blacks ended after 80 years with the overthrow of the Jim Crow system in the South and gains in the rest of the country by the Black liberation and civil rights struggle in the 1950s and 1960s.

We have been witnessing since the 1970s a counter-revolution to those gains that has been called “The New Jim Crow” by scholar Michelle Alexander.

When it became known in the last two weeks that the virus was killing Blacks at a much higher rate than the rest of the population, there have been front-page articles about how this is rooted in the continuing oppression of African Americans indicated by every measure including health. The first time in years this has been brought to the public’s attention outside of the left press.

The centuries long national oppression of African Americans spilled over to racism against other peoples of color. This was intensified by U.S. imperialism’s domination of Latin America, and on other continents.

One aspect of this has been the importation into the United States of immigrants to work in various occupations such as agriculture, service industries, and construction. A large portion of these largely Latino immigrants have no rights – they are the “undocumented”. There are at least 11 million of them.

Without rights, the undocumented suffer low wages and bad working conditions, and often live in dense concentrations.

Some in the mainstream media have noted that the virus has also hit Latinos hard. The undocumented live in the Latino communities. Many families have people who are U.S. citizens, some who have papers allowing them to live in the U.S., as well as the undocumented.

In New York City, the epicenter of the pandemic in the U.S., the population with the highest percentage of coronavirus cases and deaths are Latinos in the borough of Queens.

One outcome of the pandemic has been the racist treatment of Chinese Americans and other Asians who “look Chinese” fomented by Trump and the Republicans.

Another thing that has been only partially noted in the press is the sorry state of the health system in the U.S. One aspect that has drawn attention is the truly awful conditions in “nursing homes” for the elderly. The pandemic has festered in them.

All of this and more I haven’t mentioned affect health and are evident in the pandemic.

The Pandemic Is World Wide

While there are particular aspects of the pandemic in the U.S. and the other countries, it has spread throughout the world. Its impact on the U.S. both as health and economic crises has to be seen as part of the international impact of the pandemic.

It is ridiculous to think that each country, including the U.S., can deal with the virus and its economic impact alone. The virus knows no boundaries. As long as it is in some countries, no country can wipe it out by itself.

With the overthrow of the Soviet Union by its ruling bureaucracy and the reestablishment of capitalism in its republics and its satellite countries, and the same in China although on a different time scale and route, capitalism dominates everywhere with few exceptions especially Cuba.

The economies of the capitalist world are intertwined in many ways. The pandemic has disrupted supply chains and commerce. All face recession.

Another aspect is that the richest countries have become, since the beginning of the twentieth century, imperialist exploiters of the great masses in what is called the “global south” in new ways based on the domination of monopolies and the merging of banking and industrial capitalists in the “centers”.

Just as the poorest workers suffer the most in the pandemic in the U.S. and the other imperialist countries, the poorest countries will suffer the most economically as well as in the health impact as the pandemic spreads to Africa, from China to other parts of Asia such as India, and Latin America.

What is needed to fight the virus is international solidarity and collaboration to find effective drugs and a vaccine. These should be shared freely among all peoples – no patents and “cornering the market.” There should be collaboration among the different health departments in all the countries, sending doctors and nurses as well as medical equipment to countries that need it most.

Ameliorating the economic disruption also requires international cooperation and solidarity. The richest countries should help the poor countries. In each country funds to help the workers, peasants

and middle classes should be the top priority within the context of targeting aid to the producers of the poorest countries.

Alas, the world is moving in the opposite direction. Somewhat surprisingly, an article in the business section of the New York Times says "A nationalist mind-set among world leaders is jeopardizing access to lifesaving tools for all.

"As they battle a pandemic that has no borders, the leaders of many of the world's largest economies are in the thrall of unabashedly nationalist principles, undermining collective efforts to tame the novel coronavirus.

"The United States ... is led by a president who openly scoffs at international cooperation while pursuing a global trade war. India, which produces a staggering amount of drugs, is ruled by a Hindu nationalist who has ratcheted up confrontation with neighbors. China, a dominant source of protective gear and medicines, is bent on a mission to restore its former imperial glory

"At least 69 countries have banned or restricted the export of protective equipment, medical devices or drugs The World Health Organization warns that protectionism could limit the global availability of vaccines. With every country on the planet in need of the same lifesaving tools at once, national rivalries are jeopardizing access for all.

" 'The parties with the deepest pockets will secure these vaccines and medicines, and, essentially, much of the developing world will be entirely out of the picture,' said Simon J. Everett, an expert on international trade We will have rationing by price. It will be brutal.' "

Little Cuba stands out from all other countries in sending doctors to countries with the most need. Others send few if any.

The U.S. is imposing economic sanctions on many oppressed countries that make both the health and economic results of the pandemic worse. It has now impeded medical equipment destined for Cuba.

What is behind this failure of international collaboration and solidarity in the face of the pandemic is imperialism. The rich imperialist countries don't want to make aid to the oppressed countries any kind of priority.

The imperialist countries have historically been in fierce competition among themselves, which led to two world wars. Today, international capitalist competition is once again on the rise due to the workings of the capitalist economies, including a falling rate of profit.

They compete not only economically but over crucial equipment to fight the virus.

Only international socialist revolution can put an end to this dog eat dog world, something not on the immediate agenda anywhere. We can hope that the terrible consequences of the pandemic will push more people to see this need.

In the meantime, we can struggle to demand more international cooperation when the occasion arises, including an end to Washington's sanctions.

Workers in many countries are beginning to organize to counter the economic and health consequences of the pandemic and we can join those, and help organize them when possible.

There are the beginnings of self-organizing to deal cooperatively with the various manifestations of

the health crisis.

Other forms of protest will be likely against the failures of governments to protect the workers, peasants and poor from the pandemic.

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